

Migration, Disability and Education: Reflections from a Special School in the East of England

Caroline Oliver, University of Roehampton and Nidhi Singal, University of Cambridge

In British Journal of Sociology of Education, 2017, forthcoming.

Abstract

Studies of migrant pupils in schools have paid little attention to people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, reflecting a broader normative ableism of existing scholarship. This article, based on a case study of a special school in the East of England explores the perspectives of staff and new migrants on their experiences. It exposes how migrant families' interactions with schools were shaped both by their previous migration histories and current broader processes of 'integration.' Teachers were empathetic and supportive, but it was the extended remit of the work of migrant and minority staff (including translation and wider caring roles) that proved particularly vital for families. We employ an intersectional approach to interpret these encounters, exposing the tensions and dilemmas arising. Further research is needed to develop understanding and critical engagement with the challenges facing these families, arising from the specific intersections of disability, migration, social class and gender.

Keywords

Migration; disability; integration; intersectionality; schools; special educational needs.

Introduction

Substantial increases in transnational migration and particularly intra-EU migration to the UK following European Union Enlargement (2004) has generated widespread popular, political and media concern about the impact on schools, including pressures on school places and increased public spending (Paton 2010). The presence of immigrant children in schools is often posed as a ‘problem’; a threat to the host society identity, with migrant children consuming valuable resources, and vulnerable to segregation and marginalisation (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). There has been a growing body of research exploring the educational experiences of migrant children, which within the UK, includes attention to asylum seekers or refugees (Rutter 2006; Pinson, Candappa and Arnot 2010) as well as Eastern European young people (Tereshenko 2014; Sime and Fox, 2015). However, within this literature there is little consideration of migrant pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) in either mainstream or special schools.

The neglect of scholarly attention to migrant children with SEN/D corresponds with a broader invisibility of migrants with disabilities in the field of migration studies more generally. Although the scope of migration studies has broadened considerably in the wake of postcolonial, subaltern and feminist critiques, it is still a discipline that assumes a normative focus on able-bodied migrants. This position reflects the implicit ableism of past and current state immigration regimes that privilege able-bodied migrants at the expense of racialized, gendered and disabled others (see Young Welke, 2010). Although numbers are unknown, some suggest that up to 10% of all displaced people will have a disability (Shivji 2010) yet little is known of their experiences (see exceptions including Mirza [2011] and Stevens [2010]). A report by the British charity *Scope* (2012) on British Minority Ethnic populations

with disabilities highlighted ‘a lack of understanding of the links between disability and migration’ and indicated that ‘there are issues particular to migrant communities that require greater evidence and action’ (2012: 29). Certainly the few studies exploring the intersecting experiences of disability and migration suggest that migrants with disabilities are at risk of marginalization, social isolation, limited job opportunities and rejection on the basis of their otherness (Albrecht, Devlieger, and Van Hove 2009; Amas and Lagdano 2010).

Attention to these hidden populations is particularly pressing in the field of education, where the experiences of families with migrant children with disabilities are rarely considered but speak to important debates in contemporary education. On one hand, there is growing concern about the widespread incidence of ethnic disproportionality in special educational needs (SEN) globally (Artiles 2003) and nationally (Strand and Lindsay 2009). Some of this can be explained by ‘misidentification’ of SEN by assessors because of disadvantage or cultural difference (Gabel et al. 2009) although others have demonstrated how disproportionality is not only found in judgmental categories of SEN, such as Social, Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties (Strand and Lindsay 2009). Scholars have nevertheless argued for better understanding of the broader structural and systemic social and educational inequalities that might contribute to this picture of ethnic disproportionality (Dyson and Gallanaugh 2008) and understanding the experiences of new migrant families might provide some insight into these realms.

On the other hand, given the increase in global migration, there is also a requirement for schools to develop better understandings of the ways in which cultural identities and migrant histories shape familial and individual understandings of, and responses to disability. Research on ethnic minority families has drawn attention to the impacts of different belief

systems about the causes of disability (especially among South Asian families, see Croot et al. 2008). However, scholars stress how challenges faced are also caused by circumstantial or contextual factors, such as a relative ignorance of disability and its implications, or parents' lack of confidence in negotiating their lives in a different society (Ahmad 2000, Ali et al. 2006). Problems may also emerge from systemic weaknesses in the receiving society's institutions, with families facing difficulties in accessing educational and healthcare support, especially because of limited facilities for non-English speaking families (Katbamna et al. 2004, Hatton et al. 2003). Bywaters et al. (2003) elucidate in particular the importance of 'socially created' barriers rather than belief systems as factors explaining the low uptake of service provision among Pakistani and Bangladeshi families. They observe that, 'there was little evidence that religious beliefs and associated attitudes rather than institutional racism had resulted in the low levels of service provision which the families experienced' (ibid.:502).

Considering migrant families' perspectives

The perspectives of migrant families need to be added to the existing literature because, as we demonstrate, their interactions with schools are influenced by their migration experiences. Having a child with a disability may be the pivotal factor in families' decisions to move or stay behind. Their understandings of educational approaches are also likely to be contextualised in relation to both their prior experiences in the home country, transnational relationships and their current experiences of broader social and economic 'integration' in the receiving country (1). Schools play crucial roles in these processes; along with workplaces, they are often the first environments where in-depth contact with the host society is experienced (Adams and Kirova 2006). They play a major role in socializing children,

offering spaces for children to observe conventions and learn the rules of the dominant discourses, whilst providing important places of orientation for parents (ibid.).

Current analysis however offers little understanding of how schools operate as key actors within the integration processes of migrant families with children with disabilities, but this is important since these families face additional pressures through the intersection of migration and disability. Caring for a child with disability might on one hand either compel or restrict opportunities for both migration and/or subsequent labour market integration. Migrant parents may face stronger economic imperatives to work, yet their work-life patterns, including shift work, anti-social hours and travel coupled with the need to reconcile work with care responsibilities might restrict opportunities for social interaction. More positively, the experience of having a child with disability might give common grounds for families to develop social interactions with other families and develop 'affective' belonging through shared experiences and values.

This case study, in addition to considering the above factors, also demonstrates how migration can complicate disabled students' admission, assessment and settling in processes. We also show how families' prior experiences of schooling and healthcare in other countries can lead to misunderstandings and different expectations for migrant families (at least in the early stages). However, a significant finding is that parents spoke passionately about a putatively more tolerant and open attitude to disability and less excluding environment they felt they encountered in the UK for their children. This reflects a common picture that while on the international stage, the politics of disability has gained considerable traction since the 1970s, there is still some discrepancy at local levels that sees many countries in practice relying on more conventional individualistic notions of disability rather than a social understanding (Barnes and Mercer 2010). In this study, migrants felt there was a limited

purchase of disability politics within their home countries, which transposed in some cases into everyday experiences of social marginalization and educational exclusion for their children. Coming from these contexts, where even attending school or leaving the house might be difficult, migrants' accounts of their new educational and social circumstances following migration were overwhelmingly positive.

However, there is a dilemma raised for analysis through reporting these interactions and evaluations. While recognising that these 'here-there' comparisons were raised by migrants as agents and were not imposed by us as researchers, there is nevertheless a danger that such an account valorises the UK over sending countries in terms of their treatment of those with disabilities. The perspective risks slipping into a colonising 'saviour' narrative, in which other countries' treatment of disability is demonized and rendered 'worse' than the receiving country. This is resonant of broader debates in migration studies, for example around queer intersections; Manalansan (2006:232) explains that the success of homosexual refugees' asylum applications on the basis of sexual orientation and humanitarian grounds over recent decades depended also on documenting 'the horrible conditions that existed in their home countries'. These applications ushered in a broadened understanding of the meanings of being a refugee to include sexuality, but in doing so, the accounts also created ultimately 'an East-West dichotomy that was morally and culturally hierarchical' (ibid.:232). To overcome this reading of queer asylum, Manalansan argues for the need to better ground understandings in terms of specific complex intersections of race, class and sexuality.

In responding to these tensions, we recognise the need for us as researchers to situate informants' positive agentic understandings within wider structural frameworks and the political economy of labour migration to the UK. This provokes unsettling questions, for example inviting re-readings of some benign strategies, such as the employment of migrant

parents as volunteers, teaching assistants (TAs) and lunchtime support assistants (LSAs) in a different light. In one sense, these strategies are obviously supportive, since home-school relations are crucial for minority ethnic and migrant families who sometimes lack middle-class families' cultural capital and may be viewed by some schools as 'hard to reach' (cf. Crozier and Davies 2007). Yet positive interpretations of the employment of migrant family members are troubled when considering that those migrant individuals are sometimes highly skilled graduates, gladly accepting sub-professional occupations in the receiving society for minimal remuneration. Second, the analysis shows how some migrants' labour market experiences, as well as cultural beliefs on appropriate care, can provoke uncomfortable and troubling interactions with state institutions beyond school. For example, some parents have difficulties in providing around the clock care for their children because of fragmented employment, creating cracks and tensions in home-school relations.

Such dilemmas indicate how interpreting migrant families' experiences in UK schools can prove challenging and complicated. It nevertheless demonstrates that a fuller awareness of the cross-cutting and contradictory vectors of difference is helpful in interpreting these families' experiences, recognising the intersectionality of disability with other identity categories, including migration, social class, and gender (since the 'parents' involved with schools are often in practice mothers, see Reay 1998). As such, the article draws on the concept of intersectionality which prioritises awareness of 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (McCall 2005). Rather than recognise 'multiple oppressions' that separate out different dimensions of inequality (e.g. migrant identities, disability, class, gender, race) this perspective recognises the *interplay* of oppressions created through these social divisions which emerge in the interstices of these categories and create complex social locations. Recognising this complexity not

necessarily means moving beyond the contradictions emerging, but entails at least recognising their presence as part of the picture. As Anthias (2012:108) shows, particular ‘constellations of social relations’ can ‘lead to highly contradictory processes’, leading to both advantages in one sense, and exclusions in other ways.

Empirically these dilemmas are considered through an exploratory study, aiming to generate understanding about new migrant families’ experiences in a special school for young people with SEN/D in the East of England. By offering an understanding from the perspectives of both parents and teachers, our aim is to provide alternative views and challenge the dominant story of newly arrived migrant children as able-bodied. We also aim to encourage a more intersectional understanding of these families’ (and mothers’) experiences dealing with disability in the contexts of broader economic and spousal migration. This understanding makes explicit the dilemmas and contradictions that emerge and aims to open up conversation about alternative ways of interpreting migrants’ lives to better inform school practices.

Methodology

The research is focused on one case-study school, based in a leafy suburb of a medium sized city in the East of England. We particularly chose to work in a special school in an effort to understand the experiences of families with children with moderate to severe difficulties, while also being aware of the changing discourse around inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. While there has been an increase in the number of children with SEN/D attending mainstream schools in the UK (Department for Education 2014a) and a slight reduction in the actual number of special schools (DfE 2014b) there still been no real

change in the overall percentage of children attending special schools. In line with some of the growing critiques of the perceived ‘bias towards inclusive education’ (DfE 2011) there has been growing acknowledgment that ‘inclusion’ should prioritise engagement in learning over the geography of placement (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011), a perspective that recognises that special schools have a place in a continuum of provision underpinned by pluralist ‘inclusive values’ (Norwich 2008).

The school we chose for our study catered to a population of young people from two to nineteen years old, including those with physical disabilities, severe learning disabilities and profound and multiple learning difficulties. Our interest was provoked when we learned that the significant presence of South Asian children located in the area from the 1960s onwards had been recently supplemented by an increasing number of children after 2004 from Eastern European countries (including Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania) and others from some African countries, such as Eritrea. This changing composition reflected a wider growth in the region’s migrant worker population, with the East of England a major area of migrant employment in the industrialised food and agriculture sector (Rogaly and Qureshi 2014). School statistics reveal that of the approximately 100 pupils, 57% were white British and 43% were from other ethnicities, with 38% having English as an additional language (EAL). At the time of the research, of the ethnic minority groups, 23% of the pupils were of Pakistani heritage, 7% had another Asian background and 10% were Eastern European. The shift in the ethnic minority representation in this school was evident in the fact that in its student intake of 2011-2012, only three of the twenty new children were white-British.

The case study method, focusing on one school, was employed to generate important topics for further consideration. As Stake (2000) notes, the benefits of case studies are to ‘offer a

full and thorough knowledge of the particular' (22) and to open up new questions; in other words the case study 'proliferates rather than narrows' (24). The portrait of experiences found in this school cannot be read as a reflection on practices across all such schools and is obviously not representative. Nevertheless, the research encounter offers new findings that reach far beyond the case study site, highlighting the experiences of those rarely considered in existing work, exposing the tensions for both actors and social scientists in interpreting those encounters and generating important questions for further investigation.

The research involved several initial exploratory visits to the school, followed by ten semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were carried out with six members of staff in English. This included the male Headteacher, female Deputy Head and another male teacher (all white British, reflecting the composition of all teaching staff) as well as three female Teaching Assistants (TAs); one from Pakistan (who had lived in Britain since she was a child), one from Ukraine and one from Poland. All these individuals were actively involved in working with children from ethnic minority groups and migrant families, and the staff had significant contact with parents. We also conducted in-depth interviews with four parents of children from families who had migrated from Pakistan, Bulgaria and Poland (in a period ranging from twelve years to four years) whose children (two girls and two boys) had conditions including cerebral palsy, Syndrome K, Down Syndrome and other physical and learning disabilities. Due to the temporal and ethical constraints of the research and the fact that it would necessitate more intense qualitative methodologies to elicit their voices, we did not conduct research with the young people, but suggest that participatory research is imperative in future research. To preserve the families' anonymity, we do not refer to any of the children's conditions in the following discussion and all names and some details have been changed.

The invitation to participate in the study was provided for all parents, although in practice we spoke only with mothers. In three cases, interviews with parents were conducted in the mother's home language with a familiar TA or family friend acting as an interpreter and in one case the interview was in Punjabi, the home language of one of the researchers. We acknowledge that while using interpreters had benefits, it also had consequences for knowledge production, for example if the parents wished to discuss more private matters. All interviews were conducted on school premises in a private room, so that it was a familiar setting for the participants. In order to compensate for the parents' time we provided them with supermarket vouchers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable thematic analysis; all data are presented verbatim, using the interviewee or interpreters' own explanations. We now turn to analysis of the data, beginning first with school perspectives, followed by parental perspectives, before considering the employment of migrants within the school and some of the dilemmas raised in working with migrant families.

Schools' perspectives

I think for *special* education, what's really powerful is that it's always been embedded...that it's really important to have really good partnerships with families. And that's always been part of the research around special education about parent partnerships. And in a way that gives you a head start and so when you're thinking about a class, you think about well I want to have good partnerships with parents in the best way I can. And it just so happens that our parents are coming from different countries and have different experiences, so I need to know more about *that* to enable me to help the child in the best possible way.

The deputy head teacher Emma speaking here, suggested that the particular values of special education lend themselves well to working with migrant families, putting them at a ‘head start’ to other mainstream schools in being able to understand pupils as individuals. Nevertheless the teachers in our case study school acknowledged how migration was also a factor that changed their encounter. It complicated their assessments of children, disrupting standardised, official procedures and creating different challenges as the children settled into school. For example, in some cases, teachers worked with very little previous information when meeting new families (sometimes in cramped and substandard housing conditions or in multi-occupancy housing) since the families did not possess childrens’ previous assessment reports. This was complicated by alternative transnational living arrangements; for example, Sahid, one of the young men in the study had been cared for by his grandmother and uncle for eight years overseas, rather than by his parents in the UK.

Language differences could also complicate admission and settling in, especially since for some of the children at the school, acquisition of English was slower as a result of their disabilities. Responding to these challenges, Emma reflected,

We’re very conscious of the issue that....what would be really wrong is if a child was in a special school because it was a language issue and not a learning issue. And we’ve had the odd child that has been wrongly placed that we’ve moved out very quickly because it became very quickly apparent that they haven’t had a special need.

Sometimes referrals to the school were also delayed, coming only once children were identified through contact with other public services (e.g. the health service) particularly as

some newly arrived parents did not expect their young children to attend school. Emma explained how their teachers have had to adapt their practice in response to children's prior experiences in another country:

We've got children now who would not have been in school [yet], so although chronologically they are older, they have no experience of school. So the assessment process is longer and slower, and we're much more concerned with emotional support in the classroom to start with, rather than learning objectives. Because until they're comfortable and settled, and the family are happy, then you can't really start with the real business of educating.

As part of understanding the child, teachers also explained how they had to recognise wider family contexts, such as transnational caring arrangements and precarious employment situations which impacted on the children's care and education. Some parents worked in multiple jobs, spending long hours at work, including Sahir and Farid's fathers who were both taxi drivers. Yulia, a Bulgarian mother who had moved to the UK four years previously had part-time jobs as a midday supervisor, volunteer TA, cleaner and masseuse, which all involved flexible hours managed around the care of her daughter Elena. Emma explained empathetically:

Elena's mum gets up at 4.30am to go out cleaning, then she walks to school and is a midday supervisor. Parents working long hours; we have no experience of this culture where people say that people [...] come here to live off benefits; that's not our experience.

Parents' perspectives

We have an expression in Ukraine, the fish looks where it is deeper, and the human looks where it is better to live. (Masha, Ukrainian Teaching Assistant, former asylum-seeker).

While teachers reported adjustments in their practice, new migrant families also reported their own processes of adjustment to the school and interpretation of its practices through the lens of previous experiences and expectations of schooling. Commonly, parents' accounts reflected a binary between 'here' and 'there' which reflected a limited impact of the disability movement in their local home contexts. Beata's mother Lena spoke strongly of the perceived marginalization and restrictions that she felt her daughter experienced in Poland. She felt that if they had stayed in Poland, it may have been the case that Beata would not be in school at all. Elena's mother Yulia also favourably compared Elena's current experience with that in Bulgaria, where she had been in a larger class with ten other students with disabilities. She described her daughter in Bulgaria as often 'very sad' - just 'waiting every time for mum to come to school' and becoming isolated and withdrawn as a result. Yulia explained that in Bulgaria, she often had to physically carry Elena from place to place because of environmental barriers, including raised kerbs and steps. Masha, a TA, reflected how migration to the UK had encouraged her own reconsideration of life for people with disabilities in Ukraine:

If you've never been out of the country you don't recognise it, it's just normal. But now I just see it here and there, like there how can a disabled person even go through their door? It's impossible, there are stairs straight away, the lifts never work. So they're just sitting at home, [It's] like a prison, [for] children and families.

For some families, their children faced strong social exclusion in their home countries. For example Afia, from Eritrea had severe physical disabilities, but was removed by her mother because, as Emma explained, ‘People would think that she was possessed really, for her mum said her life could be in danger. The witchdoctor was coming round trying to exorcise her of spirits, so they uprooted themselves and came here’.

On the other hand, parents’ attitudes revealed their own divergent understandings and responses to disability. Some felt concern initially about the timing or necessity of their children’s school attendance. Lena described how surprised she was when she was asked to send Beata to school in the UK at four years old, which was earlier than she would have expected in Poland. Noor, a TA from Pakistan also explained how she mediated different perceptions, for example some of the Pakistani families felt that respite care linked to the school was not appropriate. She said, ‘99% of parents have said it’s our child, our problem [and] no one else’s’. Noor also described how some of the older families she worked with were more inclined to see a religious cause for their child’s disability and hope for a potential ‘solution’, although she noted this was becoming much less common with younger families who were fluent in English and had access to the internet and other sources of information. Lena also reflected on her initial concern that the predominant focus in England was on developing Beata’s social skills and emotional wellbeing, whereas in Poland the focus had been on providing physiotherapy. Her own understanding had shifted however, and she had come to value the emotional support and ‘care’ provided:

What is the point of her child being able to make a couple of steps, but then the child starts crying when she is in a large group of people in society? Because this is what

happened when Beata first started school here. She would start crying, as being with other children was something very new to her.

Similarly, Elena's mother Yulia emphasised how she had come to value happiness as more important than learning outcomes: 'first, she's happy, she has progressed a little bit, a little bit and this is enough'. Sahir's mother also discussed in detail how her son participated well at school, reading books, watching TV and going on visits. Her commendation of the school was in terms of 'care', as she explained that, 'in this school they care for him like a mother would. They even change his nappy'.

Mediating staff: The employment of migrant support staff

While the analysis until now has focused on parents and teachers, it was clear that a large part of the success of the parent-school partnership was down to the employment of linguistically and ethnically diverse migrant support staff. Staff did not explicitly teach in home languages, but by recruiting female TAs, volunteer TAs and lunchtime supervisors from the same communities as the pupils (some of whom were able to speak up to six languages) there was always someone on site to facilitate individualised communication and smooth home-school relations. This was especially important for children with communication difficulties or physical pain associated with their disabilities. Masha, a Ukrainian TA, explained her work with Elena, a child from Bulgaria recognising the empathy and care in their communication that went beyond language:

To her, we speak in English but if I see this expression in her, she just looks in my eyes and says, 'Russian? Yes please' and I translate everything into Russian.

Emma, the deputy head teacher also referred to a TA's work with a Polish student, whose arrival in the school coincided with several painful operations. She explained, 'when I look back on it, I feel really pleased that we've had Alina to support him in his home language while he was in pain'.

Evidently however, the support offered by auxiliary staff extended far beyond schools' traditional remit. Support staff translated documents, assisted in meetings with educational, health and social service professionals, drove parents to hospital visits if necessary, acted as mediators for parents and provided broader support for students and their families. Parental engagement was encouraged through events such as coffee mornings, field trips, a visit to the seaside and a Punjabi club, where parents and children watched things on *YouTube* and mothers came in to cook traditional food. Noor noted, 'it's the little things like that that we do that interest the parents that keeps it going'.

As a result of the social capital generated through these practices, school became a 'first port of call' for parents around all sorts of issues unrelated to education. This meant that support staff had a very open and flexible approach to what their job might entail. Noor jokingly described her role as 'general dogsbody' to capture the range of activities she undertook. Masha, a Ukrainian TA noted how her presence enabled translation which may have been difficult to provide in existing school budgets:

Translation is very expensive, but it is important to support families. I go out of school for a few hours, even though I miss class, but they [senior staff] allow me to do this. This is important because at times they [the families] could miss something or misunderstand and it helps them get it exactly.

Through the vital work of support staff in building relationships with parents, teachers were better equipped to do their jobs. Noor's work with families gave her insight into issues at home and enabled consistency to be developed between home and school (e.g. through agreed behaviour plans). Families benefited too, for example Noor explained how her presence at medical appointments enabled mothers to attend, since without her, it would be usual for the father to go, despite them often having lesser understanding and day-to-day knowledge of their child's experience. She explained the powerful effect this had on mothers, describing how through her involvement: 'this [meeting was] maybe the first time that the mother has spoken about her child's condition and how it's going to affect her child'.

However, it was notable that interviewees stressed that these practices were enabled by senior staff members, who used creative strategies to employ staff from diverse backgrounds. Emma described how 'we've cut a few corners to get people in' and explained their encouragement of migrants' career progression, which enabled them to move from volunteers to support staff, or ideally towards qualified teacher status. For example, Yulia (Bulgarian) and Masha (Ukrainian) were both initially brought in on a voluntary basis, building on those women's social and familial connections with the school (as mother and aunt respectively). In an interview for a TA position, the Head teacher recognised Masha as related to one of their pupils, employed her initially for two months as a volunteer, and from there she was nurtured to take on more significant responsibilities. The situation was seen as 'win-win' since the school provided often a stepping stone or first experience of the labour market for some mothers, while the appreciation by senior staff of migrants' work generated both positive esteem for migrants and a sense of shared goals ('affective integration').

Tensions and challenges

Despite this largely positive picture, some challenges were inherent in these encounters and generated both implicit and explicit tensions in the schools' work with families. In particular, migrant employment rested on an unacknowledged discrepancy between the considerable skills the school benefited from and employees' levels of remuneration. For example, Masha and her husband were both university educated graduates in Ukraine, but since moving to the UK ten years previously, Masha had experienced considerable downward mobility, working as a care worker for older people before becoming a TA, which she nevertheless saw as a 'step up'. Similarly Masha's sister, previously a professional mathematics teacher and school psychologist was also working as a TA in another school, although this was ostensibly because of the impossibility of working full time because of her son's high care needs. Yet in one of the teachers' discussion of Masha and Yulia's employment at the school, not only was the discrepancy in skills, qualifications and role left unremarked, the Head teacher was viewed as a benefactor in facilitating the arrangement. Peter, a teacher explained:

We're very lucky here that Alex [the Head teacher] is very willing to work with these, like Elena's mum, Yulia, we've given her a job as lunchtime supervisor. And I think that's really helped her English come on, because she's been able to get lots more interactions, gain a lot more confidence [...] And I think that's been really good for both Elena and her mum really.

Other tensions also emerged from the TAs' mediator roles. Noor told us that she had been vulnerable to criticism from her peers at times; for instance attracting negative comments when she began work. She also talked about the implications for her of an incident where the school staff suspected that a 17 year old boy was being prepared for an arranged marriage (see Eversley and Khanom [2002] who note that some young people with physical, sensory or learning difficulties living in some ethnic communities are at risk of being forced into

marriages). Noor became concerned that the boy would be entering into what Khanum (2008) identifies as ‘false marriage’, where young people give consent to marriage, but are provided false information or have critical information about the prospective spouse withheld (such as their age, educational qualification, drug addiction or –as in this case- disabilities). During this incident, the family told Noor that they were seeking a wife in Pakistan for their son, and hoped to discharge their care responsibilities onto her. When it was evident that the young man was being taken to Pakistan, Noor and the school staff felt compelled to intervene and reported it to the authorities, even though this meant that Noor was called a ‘liar’ for her intervention and her family were subsequently marginalised by some people in the Pakistani community.

School staff also referred to their implication in a number of other safeguarding cases arising from different cultural understandings of both the use of physical punishment and judgements about what could be considered ‘appropriate’ care. Some of the migrant parents struggled in juggling primary care responsibilities for their child/ren with employment, especially when working in factories or packing vegetables during anti-social hours in distant rural locations. Emma referred to one case where a Lithuanian mother had been out working at night, leaving the child under the supervision of another adult, but the child had become injured. Teachers however expressed frustration that intervention and support from social services often came too late, resulting in these children being taken into care. In the case above, the authority’s interventions relieved the working mother from around-the-clock care burdens for her child but this meant, as Emma, said, ‘they might never be together again any more’. In an emotional discussion, Emma concluded, ‘I see it happen time and time again....And if the families had that support, they would never be in that situation’.

Other social tensions were at times evident among the parental body; although the wider school composition was mixed, the senior staff reflected that many of the British-born white families were middle class, with mothers who stayed at home rather than work in paid employment. These mothers were active in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and some felt aggrieved that other migrant families were less engaged, believing that *all* parents should turn up to support fundraising events. As a consequence of the Eastern European mothers' strong labour market integration, they were however, as a result, less strongly integrated socially, especially because their working hours meant attendance at the PTA events might not be possible. The fact that many of the children arrived and left school through organised transport also meant that opportunities for interactions with other parents were fewer than in other schools. And although racial tension between families and among students was felt to be minimal by school staff, they nevertheless reported some concern about how racially charged events between different migrant and ethnic populations in the wider city threatened to spill over into the school arena.

Issues also arose from the changing dynamics of education systems in the UK, associated with the increasing marketization and performativity through league tables and the inspection framework. Other research documents the divergences in values between school and state in relation to immigration policy (e.g. see Arnot et al [2009] on asylum-seeker children) but in this case, teachers felt stronger the discrepancy between the role they played in modelling care and benevolence to the newly arrived families that sat potentially at odds with the targets of the national inspection frameworks. The Deputy Head teacher talked about the balance that they needed to strike when faced with these conflicting pressures:

...At times we *don't* do some of the things of the new Ofsted framework. I know there are always tensions...are we pushing the right things for example, Punjabi club? But could we be doing something else? We do our best to make a difference and that's what we're doing. But Ofsted might not [think the same].

And finally, while the school prioritised 'making a difference', staff also felt frustrated by the absence of meaningful life choices for youngsters in post-school transitions, a position exacerbated again by migrant families' labour market experiences. The teachers explained that migrant parents often chose the option of full time placements in a privately run educational institution rather than opting for either the (potentially better) part-time college courses or choosing for individualised budgets, because of the irreconcilability of part-time provision for their children with work demands and language issues. The teachers therefore felt that the 'better' options were becoming a privilege only enjoyed by more economically secure middle-class families who had one parent at home. This resonates with Stevens' (2010) research on migrant families with children with disabilities in Australia, where the most striking difference in outlook with non-migrants was that they were less optimistic that the state would provide a secure future for their children as adults.

Conclusion

The reception of migrant children with disabilities is an underexplored topic, falling between gaps in disability and migration studies, and has received little attention in the burgeoning literature on migrant children in schools. This research is the first of its kind to describe the experiences of migrant pupils with SEN/D in a special school in England. The analysis has broader relevance beyond the case study, offering first, an important account of the experiences of schools, staff and families who are seldom considered. It demonstrates the

need for existing scholarship to consider the range and diversity of experiences within SEN/D and include the perspectives of those that fall outside the normative category of SEN/D. While in this article, we consider migrant children with SEN/D (which is especially pressing considering the ethnic disproportionality in those categories) these themes could and should equally be considered with reference to other marginalised and understudied populations that are rarely considered in the literature on SEN/D, such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

Second, the analysis makes further broader contributions in demonstrating the importance of understanding the tensions and contradictions that can arise between institutions, different cultural perspectives and interpretive frameworks in contexts of global migration. On one hand, the case study offers insight into the positive and important ways in which schools can assist with migrants' participation, belonging and achievement. In this regard, we see teachers in a special school keen to learn about families' migration histories, cultural perspectives and experiences of precarious employment and poor working conditions, interpreting migratory status as just another variable to be understood in being able to better educate their children. Parents and support staff also showed how migration offered them a powerful vantage point from which to assess children's experiences of disability both in the sending and receiving country. The account confirms the important role of schooling - including special schools- within new migrants' reception and integration processes.

On the other hand, tensions are exposed in this account, emerging from the complex intersections of migration, disability, class and gender for individuals within these specific social contexts. The employment of ethnically and linguistically diverse female support staff enabled the school to teach and support their children more effectively, while simultaneously

encouraging migrants' 'integration' linguistically, economically and affectively. Yet in practice, this extended the remit of staff and placed them in difficult positions. It enabled the school to benefit from well-educated and/or linguistically skilled personnel at low cost, even while this process was unremarked upon or interpreted by others as an act of benevolence, reflecting wider systemic inequalities between subjects. And while staff did their best to cushion the impacts of migrants' different home and work-life, inevitably cleavages in terms of both cultural different viewpoints and material inequality could create situations that were problematic for schools to negotiate, including issues around safeguarding, forced marriage or 'appropriate care' of children with disabilities by parents striving to earn a living in difficult circumstances. In extreme cases this led to the involvement of criminal justice agencies and social services, with consequences including the removal of those children into care. And finally, the account shows how the supportive work of the school in the provision of a year-round extended education for young people gave parents a positive experience that was unlikely to be equalled in post-school transitions. Certainly more extensive investigation is warranted about poorer long term outcomes and exclusion facing these young people in their lives beyond school, arising, we suggest, as a result of the intersection of migration and disability.

As such, the research draws attention to overlooked populations, highlights areas requiring further investigation and demonstrates the importance of developing adequate interpretive frameworks that represent the complex social relations shaping the lives of individuals narrating their experiences from different geographic and social locations following migration. In drawing attention to the tensions and contradictions emerging in these educational encounters, the study has important implications for further research and practice. Yet it shows how the adoption of sensitive intersectional and post-colonial analyses that

capture adequately the tensions, power imbalances and cleavages of advantage and disadvantage operating throughout encounters is vital to fully understand the experiences of these families and their reception in schools.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to both our research participants and the members of a wider project group at the University of Cambridge from out of which this project arose, Diane Reay, Kristine Black-Hawkins and Richard Byers.

Funding

This research was supported by a TPRP grant at the University of Cambridge.

Notes

1. We define integration here as a two-way set of multi-dimensional processes, occurring in interrelated spheres (economic, social, cultural, civic and in relation to identity and belonging) requiring mutual efforts on the part of both immigrants and actors in the receiving society to ensure immigrants' full and equal participation (Spencer 2011).

References

Ahmad, W. I. U. (Ed.) 2000. *Ethnicity, disability and chronic illness*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Albrecht, G. L., Devlieger, P. And Van Hove, G. 2009. Living on the margin: Disabled Iranians in Belgian society. *Disability & Society*. 24: 259-271.
- Ali, N., Atkin, K., Craig, G., Dadze-Arthur, A., Elliott, E. And Edwards, A. 2006. *Ethnicity, disability and work. Examining the inclusion of people with sensory impairments from black and minority ethnic groups into the labour market*. Social Research Papers, Social Policy. Hull: University Of Hull.
- Amas, N. And Lagnado, J. 2010. Failing London's disabled refugees. *Forced Migration Review*. 35: 27-28.
- Anthias, F. 2012. Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality. Towards a translocational frame. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2 (2): 102-110.
- Arnot, M. Pinson, H. Candappa, M. 2009. compassion, caring and justice: teachers' strategies to maintain moral integrity in the face of national hostility to the 'non-citizen'. *Educational Review*. 61 (3). 249-264.
- Artiles, A. J. 2003. Special education's changing identity: Paradoxes and dilemmas in views of culture and space. *Harvard Educational Review*, 73(2), 164-202.
- Barnes, C. and Mercer, G. 2010. *Exploring Disability* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Polity.
- Bywaters, P., Ali, Z., Fazil, Q., Wallace, L. M., & Singh, G. 2003. Attitudes towards disability amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents of disabled children in the UK: considerations for service providers and the disability movement. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 11 (6), 502-509.
- Cooper, P. and Jacobs, B. 2011. *From inclusion to engagement. helping students engage with schooling through policy and practice*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Croot, E. J., Grant, G., Cooper, C. L., & Mathers, N. 2008. Perceptions of the causes of childhood disability among Pakistani families living in the UK. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 16(6), 606-613.

- Crozier, G. and Davies, J. 2007. Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents. *British Educational Research Journal*. 33 (3): 295-313.
- Department for Education. 2011. *Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability*. Accessed online on 15.01.2016 at [<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eorderingdownload/green-paper-sen.pdf>]
- Department for Education. 2014a. *Children with special educational needs 2014: an analysis*. SFR 31/2014. Accessed online on 15.01.2016 at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/350129/SFR31_2014]
- Department for Education. 2014b. *Number of schools, teachers and students in England*. Accessed online on 15.01.2016 at [<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/number-of-schools-teachers-and-students-in-england>.]
- Dyson, A. and Gallannaugh, F. 2008. Disproportionality in special needs education in England. *Journal of Special Education*, 42(1): 36–46.
- Eversley, J. and Khanom, H. (2002). *Forced marriage in the Bangladeshi community*. London: Public Policy Research Unit, Queen Mary, University Of London.
- Gabel, S.L., Curcic, S. Powell, J. Khader, K. Albee, L. 2004. Migration and ethnic disproportionality in special education: an exploratory study. *Disability & Society*. 24 (5): 625-639.
- Hatton, C., Akram, Y., Robertson, J., Shah, R., & Emerson, E. 2003. The disclosure process and its impact on south asian families with a child with severe intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research In Intellectual Disabilities*, 16, 177-188.

- Katbamna, S., Ahmad, W., Bhakta, P., Baker, R., & Parker, G. 2004. Do they look after their own? Informal support for South Asian carers. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 12(5), 398-406.
- Khanum, N. 2008. Forced marriage, family cohesion and community engagement: National learning through a case study of Luton. Watford: Barham Press/Equality In Diversity.
- Manalansan IV, Martin F. 2006. Queer intersections: sexuality and gender in migration studies. *International Migration Review* 40 (1): 224-249.
- Mcall, L. 2005. The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 30 (3). 1771-800.
- Mirza, M. 2011. Disability and cross-border mobility: comparing resettlement experiences of Cambodian and Somali refugees with disabilities. 26 (5): 521-535.
- Norwich, B. (2008) *Dilemmas of difference, inclusion and disability: International perspectives and future directions*. London: Routledge.
- Paton, G. 2010. 'Warning over primary school admissions crisis'. *The Telegraph*. 25th September.
- Pinson, H. Candappa, M., & Arnot, M. 2010. *Education, asylum and the 'non-citizen' child: the politics of compassion and belonging*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rogaly, B. and Qureshi, K. 2014 'That's where my perception of it all was shattered': Oral histories and moral geographies of food sector employment in an English city region. *Working Paper No 71, Sussex Centre for Migration Research*. Sussex: University Of Sussex.
- Reay, D. 1998. *Class work: Mothers' involvement in children's schooling*. London: University College Press.
- Rutter, J. 2006. *Refugee children in the UK*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- Scope 2012. *Over-looked communities, over-due change: How services can better support bme disabled people*. London: Scope. Retrieved From [Http://www.Scope.Org.Uk/Scope/Media/Images/Publication%20Directory/Over-Looked-Communities-Over-Due-Change.Pdf?Ext=.Pdf](http://www.Scope.Org.Uk/Scope/Media/Images/Publication%20Directory/Over-Looked-Communities-Over-Due-Change.Pdf?Ext=.Pdf) Accessed On 09 May 2014
- Shivji, A. 2010. Disability in displacement. *Forced Migration Review* 10. Special Issue on 'Disability in Displacement'. Issue 35, July: 4.
- Sime, D. And Fox, R. 2015. Migrant children, social capital and access to services post-migration: transitions, negotiations and complex agencies. *Children and Society*, 29 (6): 524-534.
- Spencer, S. 2011. *The migration debate*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Stake, R.E. 2000. 'The case study method in social inquiry'. In Gomm, R. Hammersley, M. And Foster, P. (Eds). *Case Study Method*. London: Sage. Pp. 18-27.
- Strand, S., & Lindsay, G. (2009). Evidence of ethnic disproportionality in special education in an English population. *The Journal of Special Education*, 43(3), 174-190.
- Stevens, C. 2010. Disability, caregiving and interpellation: Migrant and non-migrant families of children with disabilities in urban Australia. 25 (7):783-796.
- Suárez-Orozco, M. Darbes, T. Dias, S.I. and Sutin, M. 2011. Migrations and Schooling. *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*. 40:311-28.
- Tereshenko, A. 2014. *New migration, new challenges. Eastern European migrant pupils in English schools*. London: Kings College/British Academy.
- Young Welke, B. 2010. *Law and the borders of belonging in the long nineteenth century United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Author biography

Caroline Oliver is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Roehampton and affiliate researcher at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. At COMPAS, she worked as Senior Researcher (2012-2016) on family migrants' rights and their impact on integration, as well as migrant parental engagement. She has also worked as lecturer at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She has a PhD in Sociology & Social Anthropology with Development Studies and has interests in migration and education.

Nidhi Singal is Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She received her PhD and MPhil at the University of Cambridge and was trained as a clinical psychologist at the University of Delhi. Her research interests are around addressing issues of educational inequity among marginalised groups in Southern contexts, and she has worked extensively on children and young people with disabilities in South Asia and Africa, among other issues.